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Not Just a Commercial Voyage: A Cultural-Historical Perspective of the East Indiaman *Compton's* Voyage to Bombay (1723–26)

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Abstract

This essay aims to give an account of the untold and unexpected events faced by the crew of the *Compton*, one of the East India Company's vessels that set out on a routine trade voyage from Deptford to Bombay in April 1723. Under the command of Captain William Mawson, scrupulous compiler of the logbook, the ship proceeded along the known routes indicated by the East India Company (EIC) charts, and through the passages recommended by the navigation manuals. Finding consonance with recent research suggestions on “alternative histories” of the EIC, this article brings to light the narrative potentialities of the logbook, which is therefore considered not only a technical device, but also a tool for reconstructing the actual experience of navigation. This is the approach of the historical geodatabase of European global navigation Global Sea Routes (GSR), which bases its research method on ship's logs and other primary sources produced by the practitioners themselves. In order to provide a richer account of the known history of the EIC's shipping in the early modern age, this essay will analyse Mawson's logbook, highlighting its peculiarities as a container for a wealth of information useful for creating a narrative construction.

Keywords: Cultural History of EIC; History of Navigation; Global History; Travel Writings; Robinsonade

A Cultural-Historical Approach to the Global History of Navigation

“Thursday the 11th [December 1722]. Launched the Ship and called her the *Compton*. It being a low tide she brook on of her Bildgways [building ways]¹ and was obliges to put her in the Dry Dock” [fol. 8r].²

This is the very beginning of the logbook written by William Mawson, captain of the English East Indiaman *Compton*,³ a 480-ton vessel with thirty guns and a crew of

¹ These are the supporting structures that hold the ship under construction.

² Logbook of William Mawson, “*Compton*: Journal,” India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library [hereafter IOR, BL]; reproduced on the Qatar Digital Library website [hereafter QDL], RIOR/L/MAR/B/666A, https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000000229.0x00035c [accessed 6 May 2022]. This is the source for all of Mawson's log quotations.

³ She then passed under the command of Captain John Misenor for a second voyage to Bengal (1728–30) and a third to China (1731–34). Thereafter she passed to Captain Robert Holmes and made a fourth voyage to Bengal

eighty-eight men, just launched at Bronsdon's Yard in Deptford along the Thames. This is how the voyage of this English East India Company (EIC) ship began—with a hitch, which will not be the only one—as she prepared to reach the northwest coast of India, and from there engage in inter-Asian trade and transport, before resuming her homeward journey.

This article proposes the analysis of a specific source, the logbook, with attention both to the style and editorial intention of its compiler, and to the historical-cultural peculiarities suggested by events and happenings recorded during the voyage. In this respect, the method of analysis and use of the EIC logbooks developed within the context of the Global Sea Routes (GSR) project is fundamental for the reconstruction of transoceanic trade routes, particularly to the East, and their digital and interactive georeferencing.⁴ Thanks to the detailed study of this source, the voyage loses the appearance of a more or less routine experience, comparable to many similar ones, and gains complexity, enriched with data and interpretative perspectives in dialogue with the broad field of studies on the strategies, modes, times, practices, and practitioners of EIC naval and commercial history.

Since the 2000s, historiography on the EIC has experimented with new approaches, taking into account relatively unexploited sources. Particularly significant has been the contribution of cultural and postcolonial history,⁵ which suggests observing objects and subjects “other” than those traditionally approached by research, and shifting the focus of observation from the centre to its peripheries, employing transdisciplinary methodologies and interpretative tools and a scale of analysis that is more inward and closer to the experience of the actors on the ground.

Taking these suggestions on board, the work on the *Compton's* logbook has brought to light aspects of the events “hidden” between its pages and which are neither expected nor obvious, with the intention of extracting useful elements from the mass of technical information on navigation in order to build an original and articulate narrative, capable of offering new perspectives on the history of the EIC and on the phenomena of global commercial and political-military expansion in which it was a protagonist.

In the following pages we will introduce the general chrono-geographical breakdown of the voyage and illustrate the polysemic potential of the logbook: an object and a form of writing that are at the same time an expression of a bureaucratic practice proper to the functioning of the EIC, and a specific and personal manifestation of another practice belonging to the protagonists of navigation, that of “keeping track” of a non-ordinary experience, “tracing” the human presence in the midst of the oceans of the globe, as shaped, in the present case, by Captain William Mawson's narrative drive.

The Cultural-Historical Potential of a Multifaceted Source

Historically, the logbook served three main purposes: to reconstruct the voyage in time and space, to process data and information on navigation resulting from the various

and Bengkulu (Sumatra), where she was destroyed by fire on 12 January 1737. Anthony Farrington, *Catalogue of East India Company Ships' Journals and Logs, 1600-1834* (London: British Library, 1999), 132; Rowan Hackman, *Ships of the East India Company* (Gravesend: World Ship Society, 2001), 84.

⁴ For the case study see Erica Grossi, “Voyage of the East Indiaman *Compton* to Bombay and Madras, 01-04-1723 05-04-1726,” in Guido Abbattista, principal investigator, Global Sea Routes [hereafter GSR], 2021, <https://globalsearoutes.net/geodatabase/>.

⁵ Among others: Richard Dunn and Rebekah Higgitt, eds., *Navigational Enterprises in Europe and Its Empires, 1730-1850* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015); Anna Winterbottom, *Hybrid Knowledge in the Early East India Company World* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016); “Alternative Histories of the East India Company,” special issue, *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 17:3 (2017); Aske L. Brock, Guido van Meersebergen, and Edmond Smith, eds., *Trading Companies and Travel Knowledge in the Early Modern World* (London: Routledge, 2022).

nautical practices, and to portray the relational dynamics established in the ships' hierarchies, in the encounters at sea and between practitioners and locals.⁶

The huge number of documents kept in the EIC archives⁷ confirms the administrative reasons for the daily recording of voyages through logbooks, and the great functional value of this information for the EIC, "a precious commodity [. . .] that would benefit future travellers."⁸

Nevertheless, in her study of logbooks in the modern age, Margaret Schotte notes:

Reams of volumes sequestered in archives from the late seventeenth century on were scarcely used either by their original creators or by administrators. [. . .] Disappointingly few of the projects imagined by administrators came to fruition. [. . .] A printed edition of a single voyage was more portable, legible, and convenient for extracting pertinent details than a series of salt-stained manuscripts.⁹

This remark refers to the consultation of logbooks by EIC crews about to embark on a transoceanic voyage. If we look instead at their consultation by other employees of the EIC—in particular, cartographers and hydrographers—it becomes clear that the hundreds of accumulated volumes played an important role in improving techniques, knowledge, and methods of transoceanic navigation between England and the East Indies. In the eighteenth century, recordkeeping by officers on board became the cornerstone of the work of Alexander Dalrymple, a Scottish geographer and hydrographer of the EIC from 1779. His task was to examine the logbooks kept in the East India House, make new calculations on longitude, and draw more accurate nautical charts from the routes plotted on blank charts by the EIC captains.¹⁰

The logbooks of the East Indiamen partly followed the historical model described in the literature on the subject, but also developed their own peculiarities and formats over time, particularly with regard to the recording of nautical and commercial information and the "reporting" of the management of discipline and health on board. This unexploited wealth of material now gains a new epistemic key in digital analysis tools such as the geodatabases and data visualisation systems used by digital history projects like GSR.¹¹ These explore the travel records of European companies in a transdisciplinary way,¹² contributing to the valorisation of a source with an unrealised potential.

⁶ Margaret Schotte, "Expert Records: Nautical Logbooks from Columbus to Cook," *Information & Culture* 48:3 (2013), 281–322.

⁷ IOR, Marine Department Records [hereafter MDR], IOR/L/MAR—1600–c.1879. The EIC archive consists of more than 10,500 volumes, mostly logbooks and journals. See John McAleer, "The East India Company Records and the Voyage to Asia," in *Adam Matthew Digital: East India Company* [hereafter AMD] 2020. According to Martin Moir, ed., *General Guide to the India Office Records* (London: British Library, 1988), 178, this corpus includes *Ships' Journals, 1605–1705* [171 vols.] (L/MAR/A), and *Ships' Logs, 1702–1856* [9,500 vols.] (L/MAR/B), for a total of 9,671 volumes out of a total of 10,500. These numbers also seem to be verified by Farrington's census, see *Catalogue*, ii.

⁸ McAleer, "The East India Company Records."

⁹ Schotte, "Expert Records," 304–5.

¹⁰ Andrew S. Cook, "Alexander Dalrymple and John Arnold: Chronometers and the Representation of Longitude on East India Company Charts," *Vistas in Astronomy* 28 (1985), 189–95; Andrew S. Cook, "Alexander Dalrymple (1737–1808), Hydrographer to the East India Company and to the Admiralty as Publisher: A Catalogue of Book and Charts" (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, 1993).

¹¹ Clive Wilkinson, "The Non-Climatic Research Potential of Ships' Logbooks and Journals," *Climatic Change* 73 (2005), 155–67.

¹² Among others: Climatological Database for the World's Oceans, 1750–1850 (CLIWOC), ed. Clive Wilkinson, 2001–2003, <https://www.historicalclimatology.com/cliwoc.html>; and The Dutch East India Company's Shipping

It is in this perspective that, among the many materials processed by GSR, we have identified William Mawson's logbook as a unique and at the same time paradigmatic model of this type of source, capable of providing information and insights for the cultural history of European transoceanic commercial navigation in the modern age.

Captain's Mawson Logbook: The Human Factor over Technical Practice

The *Compton's* logbook consists of approximately one hundred recto-verso handwritten sheets bound in a brick-red hardcover volume.¹³ On folio 7r, we find "A List of the Comptons Ships Company" with the names of the eighty-eight crewmen and their assigned roles. This information is not always present in the logbooks of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and therefore represents a significant interpretative element, underlining Mawson's desire to "keep track" of the presence of his crew. Thanks to this list, the forty-six seamen in particular are rescued from the invisibility and anonymity normally reserved for them by the traditional narrative of the EIC history.

Depending on the day and activities recorded, each page is marked by vertical and horizontal lines drawn by the captain, forming a main table with two columns and a number of rows equal to the days recorded. The left-hand column shows the current month and year in the header, while the right-hand column indicates the ship's direction, destination, or anchorage, extending over the two sheets of the open logbook. The tabular format becomes more articulated when the *Compton* is engaged in open sea navigation and the captain needs separate spaces to record nautical data, the results of observational practices and complex calculations regarding distances travelled and the direction and impact of currents and winds on the ship's body and course.¹⁴ In these navigation phases, the right-hand column is divided by four vertical lines to form a six-column table. The four new columns record: Dis[tance] / Course / Lat.^d N or Lat.^d S / M[eridian] D[istance]: W[est] / or M[eridian] D[istance]: E[ast]. "Distance" is the length, in nautical miles, travelled on a nautical day—from noon on the previous day to noon on the current day. "Course" indicates the direction of sailing held by the ship during those twenty-four hours; also recorded are the latitude and the distance from the east/west reference meridian, namely longitude, the most complex factor in determining a ship's position, which for centuries was both a transdisciplinary scientific problem and a matter of life and death for crews at sea. Longitude is in fact a relative coordinate given by the difference between the local time on the ship and that of the port of departure or a known point on land, the "zero meridian." During the *Compton's* voyage, five "departures" or zero meridians are indicated: Lizard Point, leading to Bombay; on the homeward voyage, St. Thomas Mount—today's Mylapore, south of Madras; Table Bay—today's Cape Town; St. Helena; and Ascension Island.

The general remarks column also contains other quantitative information, such as the magnetic variation or the recalculation of latitude from the revised distance data. From this point of view, Mawson seems closer to the generation of seventeenth-century compilers of the EIC's logbooks, when the influence of modern scientific thought had not yet included number surveying as a central practice of its epistemology.¹⁵ Compared to other

between the Netherlands and Asia 1595–1795 (DAS), ed. Jaap R. Bruijn, Femme S. Gaastra, and Ivo Schöffer, http://resources.huylgens.knaw.nl/das/index_html_en [accessed 6 May 2022].

¹³ The sequence of sheets, reflected in this essay's references, begins with the inside front cover (1) and ends with the inside back cover (101). The numbers, written in pencil and circled, are in the top right-hand corner on the front of each page.

¹⁴ For an exhaustive analysis of these calculations, see Philip Reid's essay in this special issue.

¹⁵ Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck, eds., *Histories of Scientific Observation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

samples from the same decade and up to the middle of the eighteenth century, Mawson's logbook seems actually more oriented towards the narration of the daily experience of navigation than towards quantitative data.¹⁶

The description of the format and structure of Mawson's logbook collocates this material object within the complex history of the disciplines and practices involved in eighteenth-century navigation and reveals its specificities. While the history of the logbook—and of the EIC's logbooks—follows a path traced by recognisable and interdependent phases,¹⁷ we cannot ignore the deviations of its “evolution” towards the standard preprinted model, established by the EIC and the Royal Navy in 1791 following the introduction of the marine chronometer for the calculation of longitude.¹⁸ Among the crucial factors, the intervention of the compiler, with his technical and nautical as well as narrative and descriptive skills and competences, plays an important role. These specificities, determined by the writer's agency, are what render a technical and bureaucratic instrument—which over time shows clear patterns but also obvious discontinuities—so changeable.

In the case of the *Compton*, this agency is represented by Captain William Mawson, who assumed command of the ship on 11 December 1722, in his eighth year in the EIC. The inaugural voyage of the *Compton* was the only one he made as captain of this ship, and it was the last of his career.

The scarce biographical information available¹⁹ is supplemented by Mawson in the form of clues in the *Compton*'s logbook, which are important for reconstructing his experience as a navigator on the eastern routes of the EIC. On 14 August 1723, while crossing the Arabian Sea towards Bombay, he wrote about the “White Water”:

At ten last night the Water was changed from its Usual Colour to be as white as Milk which would very much surprise any Person who had not seen the like before. but in

¹⁶ For a comparison, see these logbooks: William Wells, “*Bedford: Journal*,” 1732–1735, IOR, BL: IOR/L/MAR/B/638A, in QDL: https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_10000000229.0x000194; John Foot, “*Salisbury : Journal*,” 1752–1754, IOR, BL: IOR/L/MAR/B/478E, in QDL: https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000000148.0x00004a; James Birkdell, *A journell for this [pre]sent voyage being bound by gods assistance to Sirratt in the East India, in the good shippe London [. . .] Captaine Mathew Wills Comaunder by me James [. . .] Birkdell Maisters Mate, 1639–1640*, IOR, BL: IOR/L/MAR/A/LXIV, in QDL: https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000001273.0x000342 [accessed 6 May 2022].

¹⁷ Among others, see Clive Wilkinson, *British Logbooks in UK Archives 17th–19th Centuries: A Survey of the Range, Selection and Suitability of British Logbooks and Related Documents for Climatic Research* (Technical Report, 2009), Climatic Research Unit, University of East Anglia, Norwich; W. E. May, “The Log-Books Used by Ships of the East India Company,” *Forum* 1:27 (1974), 116–8; Schotte, “Expert Records.”

¹⁸ The preprinted logbook dates back to 1761, but it was only after 1791 that it featured a space for “Longitude by Chronometer,” an instrument developed in the eighteenth century by the English and French craftsmen John Harrison, Pierre Le Roy, and Ferdinand Berthoud. The advent of the marine chronometer on the ships of the EIC as early as the 1770s–80s was due to individual captains buying them. On board, however, the maintenance and reading complexity of the “Timekeeper” was a limitation to its reliability and thus to the systematic recording of its results. Dava Sobel, *Longitude: The True Story of a Lone Genius Who Solved the Greatest Scientific Problem of His Time* (London: Walker & Company, 1995); Simon C. Davidson, “Marine Chronometers: The Rapid Adoption of New Technology by EIC Captains in the Period 1770–1792 on Over 580 Voyages,” *Antiquarian Horology* 40:1 (2019), 76–91; May, “The Log-Books Used by Ships of the East India Company.” A few samples of preprinted logbooks can be found in George Dundas, “*Winterton : Journal*,” IOR, BL: IOR/L/MAR/B/451C, in QDL: [fol. 85r] (175/257) https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100102249241.0x0000b0 (1788–1790), in which the chronometer is called “Time Piece”; Charles Elton Prescott, “*Princess Charlotte : Journal*,” IOR, BL: IOR/L/MAR/B/245B, in QDL: https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000001478.0x0001fd (1798–1800), [accessed 6 May 2022].

¹⁹ Anthony Farrington, *A Biographical Index of East India Company Maritime Service Officers: 1600–1834* (London: British Library, 1999), 530; Farrington, *Catalogue*, 134; Hackman, *Ships of the East India Company*, 84.

a former Voyage in this track have seen the same and another time in a Voyage to Fort S.^t George but never in any other part of the Seas. [fol. 24v]

A year later, “Sailing up the River of Bussorah [Basra],” he recorded his surprise at his first brush with the local winds: “the Hotest here I ever felt and Parch ones Skin and every thing thats Exposed to them” [fol. 46r], due to which “every part of the Ship is like a piece of Tinder” [fol. 47v].

It was, however, on his return from Madras to England—a voyage of over 200 days, 182 of which were spent on the open sea—that Mawson put his skills to the toughest test, given the unforeseen events that even the most seasoned of captains were called upon to face on such voyages. Crossing the Indian Ocean, the *Compton* encountered some unexpected “dirty Squallid” and “Unsettled Weather” [fol. 65v, 67r] that worried Mawson. He therefore decided to “Put our people to an allowance of Water of two Quarts a day the Weather promisseing us a very long Passage” [fol. 68r]. Weather conditions had not improved during the crossing of the Atlantic when, at the end of February 1725, the captain noted:

I did not expect at this time of the Year to meet with any Repulse of Wind till we had got to the North of the Line and by meeting the Rains so soon I am afraid it will be a long time before we shall reach the NE Trade. [fol. 81v]

That “I am afraid” reveals William Mawson the person, a captain but also a human being, whose emotionality is mixed with the technical language of navigation that does not erase the human factor, central to the collective and individual experience of these practitioners.

Unlike other compilers, Mawson allowed himself to make personal remarks: he did not hide the fact that he was “in pain for every thing over head” [fol. 10v]; he admitted that the wind that had just picked up “puts me in hopes it will continue to advance us into a trade Winds way” [fol. 11r], or that difficult navigation “Obliges me to make the best of my way towards Home” [fol. 84v]. His logbook is full of verbs of emotion and denotative expressions which, more than the technical data, add a contemplative dimension to the surrounding weather conditions, as when on 5 February 1726, he recorded: “Calm Mollancholly Weather and a Clear Sky” [fol. 82r].

These details highlight how the linguistic dimension can be one of the most interesting keys to understanding logbooks, capable of bringing to light previously unseen cultural aspects of the history of navigation. By focusing on the language, we can also reconstruct the lexicon, shared by the extended community of practitioners, used to refer to the operations and practices of ship and crew management as well as commercial transactions in the different ports, but which also occasionally provides glimpses of unnamed or misspelled “others.”²⁰ Their presence, with incorrect and inconsistent spellings in official “Company writings,”²¹ is indicative of the fact that the writer’s level of literacy may not always have been that high. At the same time, it provides “indirect evidence”²² of a cultural subjugation of these “others” by the English compiler through translations,

²⁰ We owe this interpretative suggestion to Sander Molenaar, “Deconstructing the ‘Imperial Gaze’ in Chinese Travel Writing: A New Look at Ma Huan’s *Ying ya sheng lan*,” Hakluyt Society Symposium 2021, Decolonising Travel Studies: Sources and Approaches (10–12 November 2021).

²¹ Guido van Meerbergen, “Writing East India Company History after the Cultural Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Seventeenth-Century East India Company and Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie,” in “Alternative Histories,” *JEMCS* 17:3, 10–36, 13.

²² Samuli Kaislaniemi, “The Linguistic World of the Early English East India Company: A Study of the English Factory in Japan, 1613–1623,” in “Alternative Histories,” *JEMCS* 17:3, 59–82, 59.

transliterations, and “assonant” appropriations of words and names, by using language as a practical tool rather than as a formal device.

The Unexpected Course of the *Compton*: An Account That Complexifies the History of the EIC

The routine with which EIC ships tackled transoceanic routes often overshadows the study and understanding of the dynamics actually at play in these voyages, inducing a kind of “street light effect.” The intense historiographical illumination of the political-economic aspects of the EIC’s activities tends to obscure the visibility of the ships and sailors who developed them. What would the global map of these activities look like if we turned the spotlight on individual vessels and their crews along the ocean expanses? The GSR project brought to light both the specific importance of ships in the overall global transoceanic trade and the kaleidoscope of unique events that each voyage presents.

We begin with an overview of the *Compton*’s voyage from England to India and back between February 1723 and April 1726, before dwelling on those passages in the logbook from which specific features and themes of a broader cultural-historical approach emerge. Along the approximately 26,000 nautical miles from Deptford (14 February 1723) to Bombay (23 August 1723) and from Madras (25 August 1725) to Woolwich (9 April 1726), the *Compton*’s transoceanic routes georeferenced in GSR may resemble many others travelled by EIC ships. However, by taking a closer look at the course thanks to georeferenced recording, dynamic visualisation features, and textual and analytical apparatuses, this voyage becomes a much more complex navigational experience. From this perspective, the *Compton*’s voyage is no longer just “a Voyage intended by Gods Assistance from England towards the Island of Bombay on the coast of Malleba [Malabar] in the East Indies and in the service of the Hon:^{ble} United Company of Merchants of Great Brittain trading [sic] to the East Indies” [fol. 6r]. Let us see why.

During the 110 days or so between the repair of the damaged hull in Deptford and the arrival at the Downs on the Kent coast, water and provisions for the voyage and the necessary equipment were loaded aboard the ship. Between 15 February and 15 March 1723, the following were also taken on board: “most part of the Company’s Goods,” “the Companys Treasure” and a small military detachment [fol. 8r]. These were “thirty Soldiers [. . .] Sign’d by Mr. Thomas Lewes” that the EIC was sending in response to a request dated 17 August 1722 from the President and Council of Bombay. The detachment would actually be “sent a Shore” on arrival in Bombay on 23 August 1723 [fol. 25v].

The presence of soldiers on board, which in the eighteenth century constituted a fundamental part of the crew,²³ was not always made explicit in the logbooks. Indeed, Mawson allows us to meet them on just a few occasions: on 5 April 1723, shortly after their departure, when he recorded the death of soldier John Jones from a “Violent Feaver” [fol. 9r]; on 25 April 1723, off the coast of Portugal, after encountering a fleet identified as Dutch and “loaded with salt from S:^t Ubes” [Sétubal], the captain recorded that they “are Stationing all our men to their quarters and exercising the Soldiers and for-mast men with small Arms” [fol. 11v]; and lastly, on 22 August 1723, before arriving in Bombay, when soldier Robert Smith “departed this life” [fol. 25v].²⁴

²³ Jean Sutton, *Lords of the East: The East India Company and Its Ships* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1981), 26. For an insight into the EIC’s military force and commercial spirit, see Filippo Chiochetti’s essay in this special issue.

²⁴ Between the Cape and Bombay, sailor Humphrey Hughs fell and drowned at sea, bringing the death count during the first part of the voyage to three.

Furthermore, also on board was the “Company’s Packet” addressed to the President and Council of Bombay, a “set of writing”²⁵ consisting of the “Companys General Letter to Bombay dated the 22nd March 1722”²⁶ and fourteen other documents that were valuable as goods to be used in the Asian trade, “as belonging to the probing part of a larger instrumental entity that operates out of a metropolitan capital and ranges over the whole globe.”²⁷

On 1 April 1723, upon leaving the Downs, the *Compton* finally took the usual route “from the Lizard” towards Madeira. On 18 April, the captain saw another English vessel leaving the port of Lisbon, from where it had just been turned away because “the Ratts had eat his bill of health and [. . .] now bound for England for another” [fol. 11r]. The “bill of health” was a certificate provided by the port authority guaranteeing the health of the crew and the absence of contagion on board.²⁸ What Mawson seems to be suggesting is that the presence of rats nullified the validity of that vessel’s certificate—although it cannot be ruled out that the rats actually ate it—forcing it to return to England to resolve this issue.

The voyage continued to the Canary Islands, whose proximity was confirmed by an exchange with “a small Vessell last from Teneriff” [fol. 12r]; then towards Cape Verde, which was not sighted due to the “Weather Hazezy which is seldom otherwise when you approach near the Island of Cape-de-Verd” [fol. 12v]. The ship crossed the equator on 26 May and headed west towards the latitude of Trindade and Martim Vaz, off the coast of Brazil. Again, the islands were not sighted and, between 6 and 7 June, when she was at a latitude of about twenty degrees south, the *Compton* turned east towards the Cape of Good Hope, which was spotted from a distance on 4 July, after two months of nonstop sailing. Until 11 June, the *Compton* had been sailing in convoy with Captain Robert Hyde’s East Indiaman *Duke of York*, but on that day the two ships lost sight of each other and followed different routes to Asia, thus breaking the clause instructing captains “to prevent their separating when in Company Outward or homew.^d”²⁹

Having rounded the Cape, the ship embarked on the so-called Inner Passage through the Mozambique Channel, known for its dangerous variable winds and contrary currents, but still a preferred route to the west coast of India. After a possible stop in the Comoros for water and provisions, the ships set a new starting point from here—to correct the accumulated frequent errors in the determination of longitude—and sailed up towards the Arabian Sea following the east coast of Africa.³⁰

²⁵ Miles Ogborn, “Writing Travels: Power, Knowledge and Ritual on the English East India Company’s Early Voyages,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geography* 2:27 (2002), 155–71, 155.

²⁶ IOR, BL, EIC, General Correspondence 1602–1859 / Letter Book 18, 1721–1723, “Company’s General Letter dated the 22nd March 1722,” IOR/E/3/101, in AMD, fols. 549–50.

²⁷ Richard Sorrenson, “The Ship as a Scientific Instrument in the Eighteenth Century,” in “Science in the Field,” special issue, *Osiris* 11 (1996), 221–36, 229.

²⁸ “Bill of health,” William Henry Smith and Edward Belcher, *The Sailor’s Word-Book* (London: Blackie and Son, 1867), 101.

²⁹ IOR, BL, EIC, General Correspondence 1602–1859 / Letter Book 18, 1721–1723, “Company’s General Letter dated the 22nd March 1722,” IOR/E/3/101, in AMD, fol. 512, par. 12. Here we also read that the *Duke of York* carried copies of the documents sent with the *Compton*, in case of any mishaps. The *Duke of York* (1) (the number after the name of the ship is used by Farrington in the *Catalogue* to distinguish ships of the same name operating successively or in some cases concurrently)—400–450 tons, 80–90 crew members, 30 cannons—reached Bombay on 19 September 1723 after a stop in Mozambique. When it arrived, Captain Hyde had been dead for twelve days, “taken with a Violent Feaver” [fol. 26r]. She was deployed in the Persian Gulf throughout 1724 and left Malabar in October 1725, returning directly to the Downs in May 1726; Farrington, *Catalogue*, 187–8.

³⁰ Ships bound for Bengal, Indonesia, or China, on the other hand, proceeded directly from the Cape to the southern Indian Ocean before heading north. David Philip Miller, “Longitude Networks on Land and Sea: The

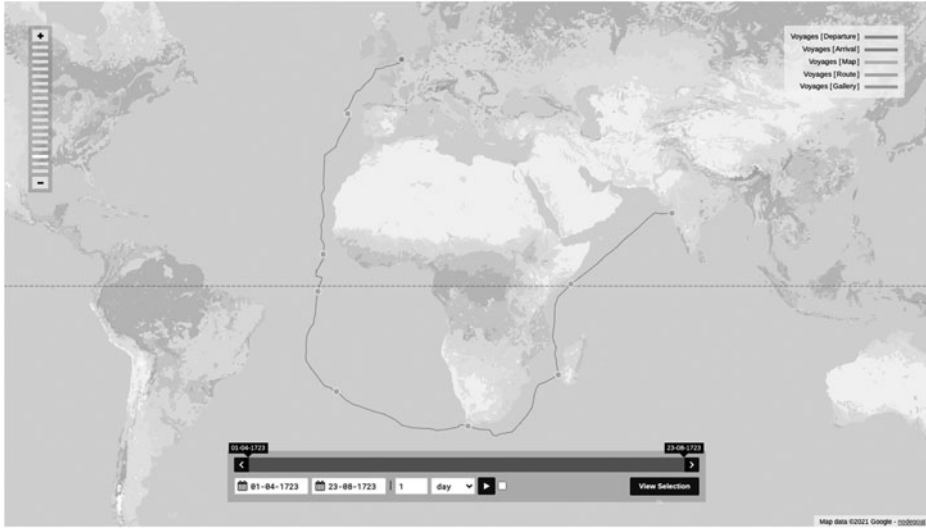


Figure 1. Georeferenced visualisation of the *Compton*'s outbound route through the Inner Passage from the Downs to Bombay (1 April 1723–23 August 1723), from Grossi, “Voyage of the East Indiaman *Compton* to Bombay and Madras,” GSR, 2021, Map data ©2021 Google.

The rationale behind the choice of passages was established by the various *Directions for Sailing* compiled, cyclically corrected, and “largely augmented” by navigation experts from the information produced by the EIC’s personnel and navigators engaged in the inter-Asian trade, made up of “manuscripts, journals, memoirs, & observations of the most experienced Officers in the Honourable East India Company’s Service, or Commanders of ships in the country trade.”³¹ The identification of these passages tells of the intense and constant effort by the extended maritime community of the EIC to document and cartographically control the space of the oceans through which men and goods forged connections, as did knowledge and practices.³²

Leaving the Mozambique Channel at the end of July 1723, the *Compton* began to steer northeast without making any stops because the Court of Directors had ordered her to “proceed as Wind and Weather will permit directly for Our Island of Bombay in the East Indies” (see [Figure 1](#)).³³

Having arrived in Bombay on 23 August 1723, the ship remained at anchor for forty-five days and then, from the beginning of October, was engaged in commercial activities along the west coast of India, calling at six main locations—Goa, Carwar [Karwar], Tellicherry [Thalassery], Cochin [Kochi], Anjengo [Anchuthengu], and Calicut

EIC and Longitude Measurement ‘in the Wild,’ in *Navigational Enterprises in Europe*, eds. Dunn and Higgin, 223–247, 227; McAleer, “The East India Company Records.”

³¹ Joseph Huddart, *The Oriental Navigator; or, New Directions for Sailing to and from the East Indies, China, New Holland, &c. &c. &c. also for the Use of the Country Ships, Trading in the Indian and China Seas, Pacific Ocean, &c. &c. &c. Collected from the Manuscripts, Journals, Memoirs, & Observations, of the Most Experienced Officers in the Honourable East India Company’s Service, or Commanders of Ships in the Country Trade; from Those of Foreign Navigators, Acquainted with the Indian and Eastern Seas; And from the last Edition of the French Neptune Oriental, by Mons. D’Après de Maneville, Being a Necessary Companion to the Complete East India Pilot, in two Large Volumes of Charts and Plans, lately Revised, and greatly Augmented. Second Edition with Considerable Additions* (London: Robert Laurie and James Whittle, 1801).

³² McAleer, “The East India Company Records.”

³³ IOR, BL, EIC, General Correspondence 1602–1859 / Letter Book 18, 1721–1723, IOR/E/3/101, in AMD, fol. 551.

[Kozhikode]. At the end of this phase, on 16 January 1724, she arrived back in Bombay, where she awaited orders to leave for England. However Mawson wrote that the governor and the council had then “taken up [my] Ship to Freight for Bussorah [Basra] and give fourteen thousand Rupees for her hire and am not to be dispatched from the said place till the last of October” [fol. 33r]. Reaching this unforeseen “last minute” destination took the *Compton* from April to August 1724, with stopovers and detours between several Persian ports, in particular the strategic port of Gombroon [Bandar Abbas], at the mouth of the Gulf. In November, she resumed sailing towards Bombay, where she arrived as late as 10 February 1725. These almost twelve months of unplanned navigation were marked by nautical vicissitudes and unexpected encounters with foreign convoys and “very Civilised” Persian peoples [fol. 51r].

Hints at the presence of pirates along the Malabar Coast are worth highlighting. The first entry is dated 23 December 1723, when the logbook records the arrival in Tellicherry of “the Fancy from Bengall which is the Ship the Pirates had when they took Mackrey and afterwards they give it him to come to Bombay” [fol. 30v]. The *Fancy* was one of the two EIC ships attacked by the Irish pirate Edward England—Captain James MacRae’s [Makrey] *Cassandra* and Captain Richard Kirby’s *Greenwich*—off the Comoros Islands on 7 August 1720. After a bloody battle between the East Indiamen and the pirate flotilla, the English survivors abandoned their ships and took refuge on Mauritius until MacRae surrendered to Edward England. The pirate allowed him and his men to depart for Bombay with the *Fancy*, as mentioned by Mawson.³⁴

The second and third references to pirates are, respectively, on 11 January 1724, when, sailing up the coast towards Bombay, the captain spotted some boats that he “took to be Angrys Grabs” [fol. 32r]; and on 22 March 1725, in the vicinity of Goa, when “two of Angry Grabs and seven Gallyvats” came dangerously close to the *Compton*, prompting the captain to effect a manoeuvre to escape. The EIC vessel was pursued by pirates “but it being dark they could not fire their Prow Guns” [fol. 57r]. Kanhoji Angre or Conajee Angria [“Angrys”] was an Indian admiral of the Maratha Navy, known in the chronicles for being the strongest opponent of the EIC colonial establishment in India at sea, undefeated until his death in 1729.³⁵

The mention of the *Fancy* and “Angrys” reveals further cultural-historical observations emerging from the analysis of the logbook as a narrative text. Firstly, the inconsistent or sometimes incorrect transcription of terms heard by locals—for example, “grab” and “gallyvat,”³⁶ which were the typical boats used to sail along the Malabar Coast—reflects the oral use of these words and the individual discretion involved in their written rendering. Secondly, the concise references to characters and events suggests that it was enough to evoke their names—even misspelled or merely implied: Angry for Angre and the *Fancy* for England—for the writer as well as the reader to be able to identify the subject of the story, but also to assess the importance—and the risk—of such an unexpected encounter. Many of the EIC’s logbooks verify this dynamic, particularly with Angre, even many years after

³⁴ John Biddulph, *The Pirates of Malabar and an Englishwoman in India Two Hundreds Years Ago* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1907); Arthur L. Hayward, ed., *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates, from Their First Rise and Settlement in the Island of Providence to the Present Year by Captain Charles Johnson*, vol. 4 (London: Routledge, 1927); Thomas Seccombe, “James MacRae,” in *Dictionary of National Biography, 1885–1900*, vol. 35, ed. Sidney Lee (London: Smith, Elder & Co.), 282–83.

³⁵ Angre rule on the west coast of India ended with the capture of Kanhoji’s son, Tulaji, in February 1756 by the EIC forces and the Peshwa Maratha. Ruby Maloni, “The Angres and the English: Contenders for Power on the West Coast of India,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 66 (2005–2006), 546–55.

³⁶ For the etymological history of these terms, see the entries in *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive*, in *Digital Dictionaries of South Asia*, <https://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/hobsonjobson/> [accessed 6 May 2022].

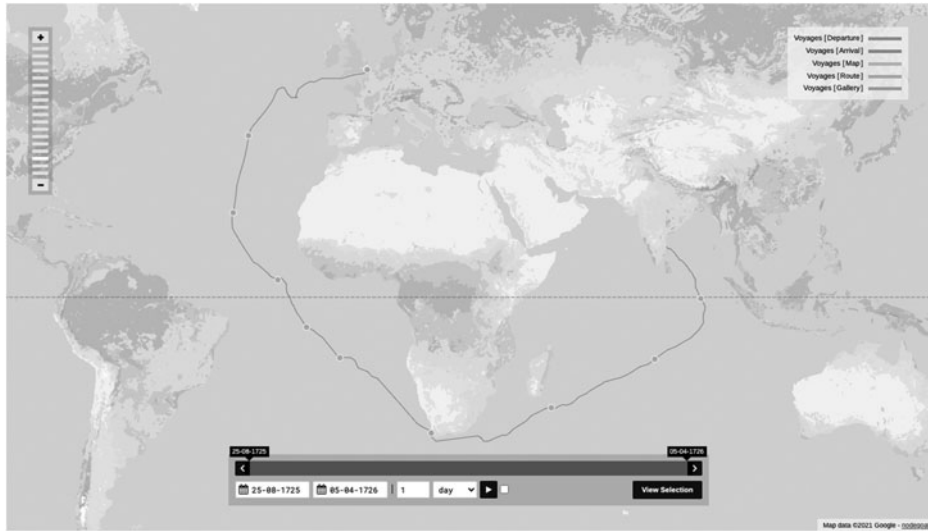


Figure 2. Georeferenced visualisation of the *Compton's* inbound route from Madras to the Downs (25 August 1725–5 April 1726), from Grossi, “Voyage of the East Indiaman *Compton* to Bombay and Madras,” GSR, 2021, Map data ©2021 Google.

Chart 1. Overview of the *Compton's* routes and navigational days.

Routes	Stopover	Time Span	Days of Actual Navigation
Outbound: from the Downs to Bombay	1	01.04.1723–23.08.1723 (145 days)	145
Inter-Asian I / East coast of India: from Bombay to Cochin and back	11	06.10.1723–04.04.1724 (182 days)	67
Inter-Asian II / Persian region: from Bombay to Bussorah and back	10	14.04.1724–10.02.1725 (303 days)	139
Inter-Asian III / Towards the west coast of India: from Bombay to Madras	6	19.03.1725–10.05.1725 (53 days)	38
Inbound: from Madras to the Downs	5	25.08.1725–05.04.1726 (224 days)	182
TOTAL	33	01.04.1723–05.04.1726 (1,101 days)	571

his death, showing how the encounter between English commercial power and privateer-pirate activity constitutes an important chapter in the history of the EIC and was transmitted over time within this community of practitioners,³⁷ to the detriment of an exhaustive representation of the others.

³⁷ Maloni, “The Angres and the English”; N. K. Mishra, “Some Aspects of Piracy in Early Eighteenth-Century Western India,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 32 (1970), 131–37; Patricia Risso, “Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Piracy: Maritime Violence in the Western Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf Region during a Long

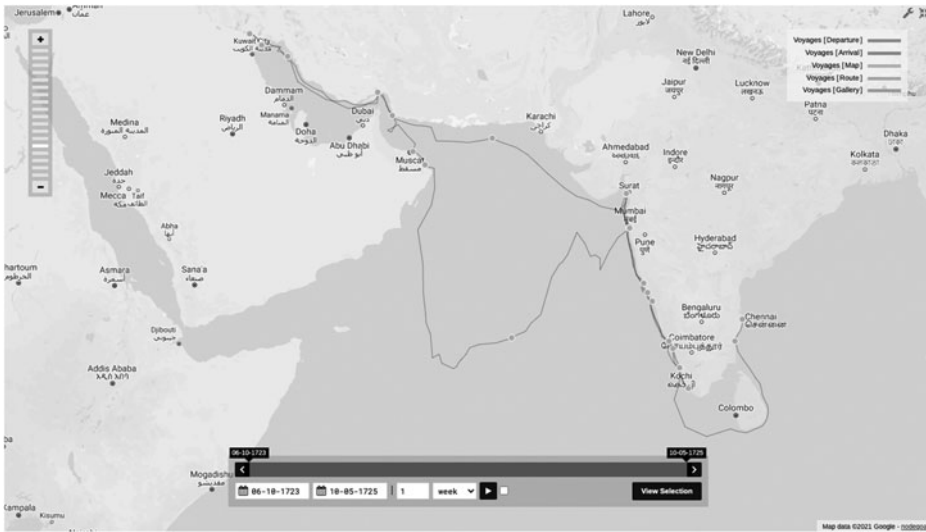


Figure 3. Georeferenced visualisation of the *Compton*'s inter-Asian route from Bombay to Bandar Abbas and Bussorah, and back to Madras (6 October 1723–10 May 1726), from Grossi, “Voyage of the East Indiaman *Compton* to Bombay and Madras,” GSR, 2021, Map data ©2021 Google.

However, these were not the last adventures of the *Compton*. On 17 March 1725, while the ship was waiting in Bombay to leave again and was “Employed in Receiving and Stowing [our] Cargo for Europe” [fol. 55v], the captain received a new order: “Here being not Bale Goods nor Pepper sufficient to Compleat [my] Tonnage as P^r Charter Party [. . .] to get [my] Ship ready and to proceed for Tellicherry and to fill up their” [fol. 56v].

The *Compton* sailed down the Malabar Coast, acquiring “on the Acc.^t of the Hon.^{ble} Company [. . .] Robins of Pepper” and “Bales of Cardimums” [fol. 59r]. The cargo was fulfilled by the end of April 1725, but by then the captain was ordered to sail to Madras and wait there for the right season to return to Europe.

Eventually, on 25 August 1725, the *Compton* set sail with the *James and Mary* under the command of the former first mate John Balchen.³⁸

The homeward journey was long and particularly “tedious” [fol. 84r]: according to the captain, the navigational difficulties of the *James and Mary* slowed the *Compton* down. Meanwhile on board, conditions deteriorated: on 30 October 1725, between Madagascar and the Cape, the captain recorded that very low temperatures “begins to Make our People who have been a longtime in a very Hott Clime to feell it very much and have several of them layd up some with Pains in their Bones” [fol. 73r]. On 10 November, there were twenty sick with scurvy and “some in Miserable Condition and others falling down every day” [fol. 75v]. A discussion between the officers resulted in the decision to stop at Table Bay: this was on 11 November 1725.³⁹

Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of Word History* 12 (2001), 293–319; Kaislaniemi, “The Linguistic World of the Early English East India Company.”

³⁸ The *James and Mary* (2)—300 tons, 60 men, 24 guns—was bound for St. Helena and Bengkulu (Downs, 29 January 1724–Deptford, 23 April 1726). The two ships met in Madras harbour in June 1725. Balchen was also the author of the logbook for the voyage (IOR, BL, IOR/L/MAR/B/676B), Farrington, *Catalogue*, 348.

³⁹ There were two fatalities on the homeward voyage: seaman Alexander Elson, 30 October; and midshipman Thomas Burnett, who died in St. Helena on 30 December “after a long illness” [fol. 79r].

Chart 2. Main commodities transported on board the *Compton* between inter-Asian destinations.⁴⁰

Commodities	Loaded (from)	Unloaded (to)
Cotton	Bombay	Tellicherry
Cowries	Anjango	Bombay
Indigo	Surat	Bussorah
Cotton	//	Gombroon
Pepper	//	//
Rice	//	//
Dates	Bussorah	Surat
//	//	Bombay

After about three weeks at the Cape, the ship resumed her voyage to England, with a planned stop at St. Helena (26 December 1725) to deliver “Thirty Bags of the Companys Rice [. . .] Brought from Bombay” [fol. 79r]. During the fifteen days on the island, repairs were ordered for the cracks in the hull that had caused water seepage.

Shortly after leaving St. Helena, Mawson headed towards Ascension Island, the last unplanned stop of the voyage, for further repairs. It was 19 January 1726. On the 22nd, the ship was ready to depart and reached the Downs on 5 April 1726, after seventy-four days at sea (see [Figure 2](#)).

In the total 1,101 days of sailing from the Downs to Bombay and back—571 actual sailing days—the ship made thirty-three different stops (see [Chart 1](#)).

Thus detailed, the *Compton*’s route highlights the density of transits in the inter-Asian phase and the dominant role of navigation along the coast or through gulfs and straits compared to the long transoceanic journeys. The GSR plotting also provides a visual appreciation of the importance of these stages of the East Indiamen’s voyage over the transoceanic crossings, which were certainly more impressive from the perspective of the history of navigation (see [Figure 3](#)).

The twofold event of the fulfilment of the ship’s cargo before leaving India confirms the need for each of the sixteen voyages that left London in that year to optimise not only time and distances but above all commercial transactions between India and Europe, and between the local destinations (see [Chart 2](#)).

Analysed in this way, the *Compton*’s experience shows that the stops and outcomes of each voyage depended as much on “Orders of [Our said] President & Council for [your] further Proceedings,”⁴¹ issued from above by the EIC, as on contingent, locally managed constraints. For this reason, closely analysing the logbook of the *Compton* and those of other EIC voyages, as GSR does, allows us to understand the patterns and peculiarities of transoceanic and inter-Asian European commercial shipping through the complex developments and articulations of individual routes that are similar to each other, but which all together display the real dynamics of this global phenomenon.

⁴⁰ These data are based on the analysis of daily logbook entries conducted by the author of this article.

⁴¹ IOR, BL, EIC, General Correspondence 1602–1859 / Letter Book 18, 1721–1723, IOR/E/3/101, in AMD, fol. 551.

The Composite Culture of Navigation: Applying Science to the Unpredictability of Experience

If we consider the *Compton* as a maritime instrument, we understand that she needed to be managed and secured “against both natural and human forces”⁴² that agitated the seas on a daily basis.

In this sense, the “know-how” on board the East Indiamen meant first and foremost the ability to “read” the surrounding space as quickly and accurately as possible, recognising the meteorological and natural, but also the artificial signs of the human presence.

Captain Mawson’s entries are an interesting example of this ability to “read” the space and the maritime code “spoken” by ships encountered at sea, the knowledge of which was as fundamental as that of anchorages or magnetic variations.

Seen in this light, Mawson’s logbook is a kind of record of the populousness of the oceans, which recasts the idea of a confrontation with an unknown vastness associated with transoceanic navigation in the modern age. In fact, we noted thirty-eight sightings of vessels and small fleets during the voyage: seven sightings on the outward voyage (six vessels and a small Dutch fleet); fifteen on the inter-Asian voyage (about forty-seven vessels, which included EIC vessels and country ships—Dutch, Portuguese, French, Bengali, Armenian, and “Moors” vessels, mainly small flotillas of “Grabs” and “Gallyvats”). On the homeward voyage, sixteen sightings were noted for a total of twenty-two vessels whose nationality was very often not identified due to the excessive distance or the absence of “Colours” displayed by the ships.

The *Compton* thus gives us an image of an anthropised oceanic landscape marked by the frequent presence of the ship-object, “an instrument that [. . .] leaves behind a real trace of its interaction with the medium it passes through.”⁴³ The logbook also allows us to observe the onboard discipline and practices in action that determine the operational efficiency of the ship as she moves around the globe: geography for determining position, hydrography for choosing anchorages, natural history for finding water, food, and wood, and ethnography for identifying friendly populations.⁴⁴

In the following pages, we will reconstruct this dynamic through the analysis of some expressions used by Mawson that paradigmatically describe the hybrid character of the theory and practice of the science of navigation, made up of nautical instruments and maps, the intuition and expertise of officers, and the information shared with other captains or local pilots. This hybridisation seems to develop a careful and conscious observation of the surrounding space, where there was a constant comparison between what Mawson perceived with his “wandering eyes”⁴⁵ and the projections and expectations shared by the composite cultural community of transoceanic navigators.

The Power of Observation: Sailing and Charting the Surrounding Space

Logbooks offer historians a valuable window into the distinct ways that experts of all levels conceptualised and documented the world around them. However, they are even more significant as a cautionary reminder of the difficulty of enforcing compliance—either behavioural or epistemic.⁴⁶

⁴² Ogborn, “Writing Travels,” 161.

⁴³ Sorrenson, “The Ship as Scientific Instrument,” 228.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Daniela Bleichmar, “The Geography of Observation: Distance and Visibility in Eighteenth-Century Botanical Travel,” in Daston and Lunbeck, *Histories of Scientific Observation*, 373–95, 377.

⁴⁶ Schotte, “Expert Records,” 307.

Captain Mawson's logbook fits perfectly into this analysis. It provides much more than just cold nautical data: it also offers reflections, hypertextual references that prove useful not only for understanding the *Compton's* voyage, but also for visualising the "geography of modern globalisation"⁴⁷ in which it took place.

This epistemological potential emerges significantly from one of the fundamental practices of navigation: observation, understood both as the application of theoretical assumptions to the understanding of reality and as the nautical skill of "keeping a good look out." This presupposes a visual relationship with the open sea as a material space aimed at producing transdisciplinary knowledge for the economic-political assertion of the EIC on a global scale.

During the *Compton's* voyage, there were many occasions in which the crew was "employed" in observing the sky and astral phenomena in order to determine geographical coordinates. More often and for even more specific and suggestive reasons, however, the crew were told to "keep a good look out" for signals from the animal, mineral, and plant worlds through which to interpret space and better locate the ship in that space, as well as in its cartographic projection.⁴⁸

Expressions such as "observ'd," "by Observation," "no observation" were frequent in this as in many of the EIC logbooks, defining and emphasising the epistemological perspective that permeated the scientific disciplines as they were formed in the modern age.⁴⁹ For the sciences involved in maritime practice, as with those of botany and medicine, recordkeeping was imperative in order to keep track of a specific case or a specific voyage in order to standardise methods and practices within a consolidated knowledge, here transoceanic navigation.⁵⁰ In this sense, the logbook is part of that set of recorded "observations" that acquire their own dignity as an "epistemic genre" in which specific empirical knowledge is condensed.⁵¹

It is, however, "keeping a good look out" that is the textual refrain describing observation at sea in Mawson's logbook. On a linguistic level, with its combination of the verb "to keep" and the adjective "good," this expression conveys the continuity, persistence, and habit of the action performed by the crew, and the intrinsic qualitative value of that action, thus distinguishing it from instrumental observation, a mere technical action. "Look-out," as defined by *The Sailor's Word-Book*, is:

watchful attention; there is always a look-out kept from the forecandle, foretopsail-yard, or above, to watch for any dangerous object laying near a ship's track, for any strange sail having in sight, &c.; the officer of the watch accordingly calls frequently from the quarter-deck to the masthead-man appointed for this service, "Look out afore there."⁵²

It was not enough to just look around: it was necessary to keep a watchful eye out for signs that verified a calculated position, avoided expected obstacles, or revealed new and different landmarks to be marked on maps.

On an anthropological level, this expression "frames," for a contemporary reader, the involvement required of the community on board to safeguard the voyage. While the

⁴⁷ Ogborn, "Writing Travels," 155.

⁴⁸ For a further perspective on this subject, see Clive Wilkinson's contribution in this special issue.

⁴⁹ Lorraine Daston, "The Empire of Observation, 1600-1800," in Daston and Lunbeck, *Histories of Observation*, 81-113.

⁵⁰ McAleer, "The East India Company Records."

⁵¹ Gianna Pomata, "Observation Rising: Birth of an Epistemic Genre, 1500-1650," in Daston and Lunbeck, *Histories of Scientific Observation*, 45-80, 47.

⁵² "Look-out," Smith and Belcher, *The Sailor's Word-Book*, 455.

calculation of astronomical distances directly involved the officers, who were required to be certified for these specific skills,⁵³ “ecological” observation was the prerogative of the entire crew and its recording in the logbooks reveals the dynamic relationship between the various figures on watch on the bow, on the spars, and on the quarterdeck. They shared and at the same time contributed to building that “maritime culture” described by Leitão as “a peculiar blend of practical skills coupled with rough theoretical notions; [. . .] a very close proximity to technological artefact; a predisposition to accept the novel in nature.”⁵⁴ Nevertheless, this observational approach shared by the ship’s community did not ignore the onboard hierarchical chain. The final word on the reliability of a sighting and, therefore, on the strategy to be followed, lay exclusively with the commanding officers, often the same ones who decided whether and how to record what was observed on the official charts and in the logbook.

The routine of careful observation, however, induced in the entire crew a perceptive and cognitive redefinition and a specific disposition to relate to the natural phenomena they were exposed to on a daily basis. This happened, for example, on 5 May 1723 when the *Compton* was “approaching near the Latitude of Cape-de-Verde Islands” and the crew “kept a good look out” to sight land and instead detected “a few flying fish about the Ship,” “several Albecores [albacores] and Dolphins and a few birds” [fol. 12v] from which they deduced the island’s proximity.

The lack of this type of naturalistic sign also helped to better locate the ship. Between 7 and 9 June 1723, while the *Compton* was plotting her usual southwesterly curve in the Atlantic Ocean before turning east and heading towards the Cape, the captain recorded: “I kept a very good look out for the Islands Trinidado and Martinvas being in their Latitude [. . .] but have no marks of them as Men of War birds and Booby’s which those Islands are plentyfully inhabited with” [fol. 16v].

These two examples also show how the practice and habit of observation constructed a specific “ecological anthropology,” a peculiar relationship between man and the surrounding space, of which the logbooks are the practical guides.

Mawson also gives us a glimpse of the tools, objects, and papers on the captain’s desk engaged in recording what he observed. In the 26 May 1724 entry, the ship was off “Cape Coliatta” [Qalhat, Oman] at the entrance to the Persian Gulf, sailing towards Bandar Abbas, and the captain wrote, “I have not put down the bearings of the Land seeing nothing Remarkable the large Draught in the East India Pilot is very false but in his Direction you will find his Error” [fol. 40r].

The situation was the same in the 1 June 1724 entry: the ship was still sailing in the Gulf towards Bandar Abbas and was “to the Eastward of Cape Jasques [Bandar e-Jask, Iran] tho our Course Steer’d from Muscat twill not allow it were the Charts in the India Pilot true” [fol. 40v].

These entries refer to a collection of maps and sailing directions compiled by John Thornton (1641–1708), the first official cartographer of the EIC.⁵⁵ Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, those charts, revised and supplemented “by experienced Officers of the East India Company,” constituted the English collection used by the EIC and known as *The Country Trade East India Pilot*. The subsequent editions of this tool also included the charts of the French *Neptune Oriental*, first published in 1745 by

⁵³ Miller, “Longitude Networks,” 232.

⁵⁴ Henrique Leitão, “All Aboard!: Science and Ship Culture in Sixteenth-Century Ocean Voyages,” in “Revisiting Early Modern Iberian Science, from the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries,” special issue, *Early Science and Medicine* 2/3:21 (2016), 113–82, 115.

⁵⁵ The original collection of charts drawn by Thornton was known as *The English Pilot: The Third Book Describing the Sea Coast [. . .] in the Oriental Navigation* (London, 1703). Monique de la Roncière, “Manuscript Charts by John Thornton, Hydrographer of the East India Company (1669–1701),” *Imago Mundi* 19 (1965), 46–50.

Jean-Baptiste d'Après de Manneville, hydrographer and captain of the French East India Company (Compagnie française pour le commerce des Indes orientales).⁵⁶ The refinement of these navigational tools by the different European powers was not only for the purposes of economic and commercial success, but also for the cartographic and political appropriation of oceans and lands, through the tracing of the routes travelled by ships and the lands identified and named on maps in the language of the company involved.

EIC captains such as Mawson carried the charts published in these collections on board and consulted them as they proceeded on their voyages. At the same time, they were also required—as revealed in the logbook of the *Compton* and other East Indiamen⁵⁷—to report any errors, so that the cartographers could correct and improve them for subsequent editions.

In the quoted passages, Mawson's opinion on the indications on the charts given to each *East India Pilot* emerges clearly. The data did not seem to entirely tally with the experience he and his crew were having during navigation.

If we also consider observation on board the EIC ships as simply an exploratory exercise and navigation as a science of the globe, the *Compton* becomes a paradigmatic example. On 18 October 1725 she was crossing the Indian Ocean in the direction of the Cape and was at a latitude of 25°26'S and a longitude of approximately 57°17'E. Mawson then wrote that he "Alter'd Course to WSW to get to the Southward of S^t: John Delisboa" [fol. 71v], and the following day he recorded the ship's new position as 26°56'S and 55°27'E, from which they "kept a good look out for the Island S^t: John Delisboa" [fol. 72v].

For almost four centuries, in the stretch of water between the southern extremity of Madagascar in the north, the islands of Saint Paul and Amsterdam in the south, and the island of Rodrigues in the east, charts, reports, and logbooks of European navigators indicated—at latitudes between 26° and 28°S, and longitudes between 52° and 56°E—two islands at a short distance from each other: John Delisboa and Dos Romeiros.⁵⁸ Currently recognised as objects of an extensive and populated "phantom atlas,"⁵⁹ for practitioners

⁵⁶ *The Country Trade East-India Pilot, for the navigation of the East-Indies and Oriental Seas, within the limits of the East-India Company* [. . .] chiefly composed from actual surveys and draughts communicated by experienced Officers of the East-India Company, and from the Neptune Oriental by M. D'Après de Manneville, etc. (London: Robert Laurie and James Whittle, 1799).

⁵⁷ For example, the reference to "Platt" and "Chart of Thorntons" in Wells, "Bedford : Journal" [fol. 33r].

⁵⁸ There were many names for these islands depending on the language of the person writing about or drawing them, as well as the accuracy of the transcriptions. The island of João de Lisboa, named after a Portuguese navigator who lived between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, thus becomes: Y[nsula] de Iuan de Lisboa in Gerard de Jode, in *Universi Orbis Seu Terreni Globi in Plano Effigies* (Antwerp, 1578), in Barry Lawrence Ruderman Map Collection, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/ruderman/catalog/vn270mf3052>; Insula de Juan de Lixboa in Jan Huygen van Linschoten and Bernard Paludanus, *Delineario Orarum maritimarum etc.* (Amsterdam, 1595), in David Rumsey Map Collection, https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~294915~90065748:Indian-Ocean-Delineatio-Orarum-mar?sort=Pub_List_No_InitialSort%2CPub_Date%2CPub_List_No%2CSeries_No&qvq=q:bernard%20paludanus;sort=Pub_List_No_InitialSort%2CPub_Date%2CPub_List_No%2CSeries_No;lc:RUMSEY~8~1&mi=14&trs=181; St. Iuan de Lisboa in John Thornton, *A Plat of the Indian Sea from Cabo Bonea Esperanca to Iapan* (London, 17??), in *Gallica*, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53105191r/f1.item.zoom> [accessed 6 May 2022]; and I[sola] S[an] Juã de Lisboa in Enrico Hillyer Giglioli, *Viaggio intorno al globo della R. Piro-corvetta Italiana Magenta negli anni 1865-66-67-68. [...] Relazione descrittiva e scientifica* (Milano, 1874).

⁵⁹ Edward Brooke-Hitching, *The Phantom Atlas: The Greatest Myths, Lies and Blunders on Maps* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2016). Research on the island of Juan de Lisboa and its twin/projection Dos Romeiros has identified the map of the 1868 circumnavigation of the globe by the Italian steamship *Magenta* as the most extreme temporal limit of their cartographic presence. It seems that the date of the first representation of the island on an atlas can be placed between 1550 and 1560, on the maps of a posthumous edition of João de Lisboa's *Livro de Marinharia* (ca.1514), in *Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo*, fol. 91, <https://digitarq.arquivos.pt/viewer?id=4162625> [accessed 6 May 2022].

and hydrographers of the Indian Ocean these islands no doubt represented what Conrad Malte-Brun calls “a true haunting-spirit” that feeds on theories and narratives.⁶⁰ A common factor is that these sightings occurred in unfavourable weather conditions or when visibility was reduced due to extensive clouds low on the horizon.⁶¹ This was also the case with the *Compton* as she tried to approach the coordinates of St. John Delisboa Island on a windy afternoon, “with a Very Irregular Sea” [fol. 71v] and clouds that appeared increasingly laden with rain until they resulted in “very dark Weather” [fol. 72r]. We can imagine, then, that Mawson believed that those clouds prevented the wide-open eyes of his crew from seeing unveiled before them the real land that the thin line of ink promised them from the flat surface of the chart.

However, it was an island in the Atlantic that gave the *Compton* one last ghostly appearance on the homeward voyage: Ascension Island.

Discovering the Novel in Nature: Ascension, an Island for Turtles and Castaways

Having circumnavigated the eastern side of Ascension Island, a wild island scarcely visited by EIC ships,⁶² on 19 January 1726 the *Compton* dropped anchor “in the Bay on the NW Side” [fol. 80v] for a three-day stopover. Those who chose this stopover usually did so to repair damage or to restock before the last two months or so needed to reach the first English port.

In the case of the *Compton*, both these needs occurred. Regarding the first:

Sunday the 16th. [. . .] to give the Ship a heal to better secure the Seam under the Wale where the Carpenter ripped off the Cant the Ship making much Water. [fol. 80r]

Tuesday the 18th. [. . .] stay till I Lay my Ship on the Careen to stop a Leak. [fol. 80v]
Regarding the second:
Regarding the second:

Wednesday the 19th. [. . .] put some hands a Shore in the Evening to turn Turtle. [fol. 80v]

On 20 January, they “turned ten Tortoises which were devided between the James and Mary and our selves” [fol. 80v]; while on the 22nd, when the ship was about to set sail, they “sent a Shore the Boat to fetch off the People that were a Shore to turn Tortoises but they brought none a bord” [fol. 81r].

The expression “to turn turtles/tortoises,” used here as in other logbooks without any further details, presupposes the familiarity that a coeval reader must have had with this activity and its practice at Ascension. This expression, together with “to send hands ashore,” would thus suffice to denote the operation that, in fact, justified this unscheduled stop to the EIC.

Contemporary readers, on the other hand, need to know that this “Useless Island”⁶³ has been known in literature and in the archival sources of European trading companies since the seventeenth century for its massive colony of tortoises, particularly between

⁶⁰ Conrad Malte-Brun, *A System of Universal Geography, or a Description of All the Parts of the World, on a New Plan*, etc., 3 vols. (Boston: Samuel Walker, 1834), 2: 145–7, 146.

⁶¹ Brooke-Hitching, *The Phantom Atlas*.

⁶² If we look at the sample data of the EIC voyages processed in GSR (76), we find that of 42 conducted between 1624 and 1843, only four stopped at this island, and all exclusively on the homeward voyage.

⁶³ Duff Hart-Davis, *Ascension: The Story of a South Atlantic Island* (London: Constable, 1972), 6.

December and June, between spawning and hatching. However, the method of capture reported by Mawson suggests more specific aspects of this practice.

The turtles were easy targets whilst onshore; after they'd laid their eggs they were turned on their backs [. . .] which rendered them immobile until later collected. So turtles could be kept alive until required for longer.⁶⁴

As with other fresh products in a crew's diet, sea turtle meat was recognised for its nutritional value⁶⁵ in the prevention and treatment of widespread and often fatal diseases such as scurvy, dysentery, worms, and the various and often unspecified contagious fevers.⁶⁶

However, keeping meat fresh on board was almost impossible as the tissues, exposed to the elements, developed organisms that deteriorated them. The only way, therefore, was to take live animals on board and slaughter them as needed. The practice of turning the turtle upside down thus proved to be doubly functional, because in addition to preserving the meat, it "renders him quite helpless"⁶⁷ and more manageable on board.

The need to preserve the health of the crew after a long journey from the East Indies to England, and the economic interest in the booty represented by the possible surplus of surviving turtles on the return voyage—their meat was, in fact, very much in demand at the tables of the aristocracy and wealthy of London—explain the familiarity of the EIC ships with this "verry high Cliff Land."⁶⁸

However, for the *Compton*, the island was not solely a herald of this. In the entry of 20 January 1726, Mawson added:

We found a Tent a Shore in the Bay and Beding in it a Tea Kettle and Tea Pipes a Hatchet and Nails and several other things with some Writeings Papers by which we found the Dutch Fleet the fifth of May last their Stile had put a Shore one of their Men for some Crime he had Committed [sic] on board his Writeing continue to November but we have not Dutch enough amongst us to read them we made search in several places to find the Man or his Body but could not and we doe beleive he is not gon off the Island because his Paper and a great many Necessary^s are left in the Tent. [fol. 80v]

The stopover on the island lasted one more day before the *Compton* and the *James and Mary* set sail again. Mawson did not make any further reference to the story of the Dutchman in

⁶⁴ Polly Rose Burns, "The Old Man and the Sea: Reconstructing the History of Ocean Life around Ascension Island" (PhD diss., University of York, 2018), 38.

⁶⁵ Richard Bradley, *A Course of Lectures, Upon the Materia Medica, Antient and Modern* (London: 1730), 161.

⁶⁶ On the policy of sanitary measures adopted on EIC vessels, see Cheryl Fury, "Early English East India Company Healthcare (c. 1600–1625)," *AMD* 2020; Christopher J. Duffin, "John Woodall (1570–1643) of the East India Company," *Topics in the History of Medicine* 1 (2021), 6–24; Mark Harrison, *Medicine in an Age of Commerce and Empire: Britain and Its Tropical Colonies 1660–1830* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); on medical theories about the treatment of scurvy and the breakthrough represented by the use of lemon juice, see Michael Bartholomew, "James Lind and Scurvy: A Reevaluation," *Journal for Maritime Research* 4:1 (2002), 1–14; Stephen R. Bown, *Scurvy: How a Surgeon, a Mariner, and a Gentleman Solved the Greatest Medical Mystery of the Age of Sail* (London: Penguin, 2004); Gordon C. Cook, "Scurvy in the British Mercantile Marine in the 19th Century, and the Contribution of the Seamen's Hospital Society," *Postgrad Med J* 80 (2004), 224–29.

⁶⁷ "To turn turtle," Smith and Belcher, *The Sailor's Word-Book*, 702–3.

⁶⁸ Abraham Munott, *Journall in the Sampson to East Indies*, BL: IOR/L/MAR/B/419E, in QDL, 3 June 1687 [fol. 30r], https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100104078151.0x000043 [accessed 6 May 2022].

the logbook, but, according to the literature,⁶⁹ that single stopover proved to be the perfect incipit of a story within a story: both a vehicle for a successful literary topos and the triggering event for a publishing affair with a story of its own.

Within a few years, in fact, the story would turn into a pamphlet published in London in three different editions, with different titles and versions of the story of the castaway's diary and of his actual identity.⁷⁰

Only a few years earlier, in 1719, Daniel Defoe had published *Robinson Crusoe*, a novel marking the birth of the genre of adventure fiction, built around the figure of a castaway on a deserted, wild Pacific island. While the events fictionalised by Defoe, based on the real experience of the Scottish sailor Alexander Selkirk, are a well-known subject, more about the Dutch sailor on Ascension has only come to light in the 2000s, freeing the story at least in part from the fictitious variants proposed in the different pamphlets.

He was Leendert Hasenbosch from The Hague, who until 17 April 1725 was bookkeeper on board the VOC *Prattenburg* before being sentenced to exile on Ascension in May 1725, two days after landing on the island.⁷¹ The crime he was accused of was that of sodomy, as implied by the diary reported more or less in its entirety in the English versions and which referred to the "most heinous Crime of making use of my Fellow-Creature to satisfy my Lust, whom the Almighty Creator had ordain'd another Sex for."⁷²

The similarities and differences between the original *Robinson Crusoe* and the different versions of the "Dutch Robinson Crusoe" already jump out at the reading of the titles on the front pages. There are also several inconsistencies between the pamphlets and some of the details of the discovery as recorded by Mawson. The captain never mentioned that he had decided to take the castaway's diary aboard the *Compton*, but he did claim that he had not traced either the living person or his corpse. Yet *The Just Vengeance of Heaven* declared that the diary was found by Captain Mawson next to the castaway's skeleton—a skeleton that appears leaning against a rock on the cover page of the 1730 edition. If we then compare the logbook with *Sodomy Punish'd* of 1726, we find that the entire episode was linked to the *James and Mary* crew. *An Authentic Relation* then incorrectly gave the

⁶⁹ Hart-Davis, *Ascension*; Michael Koolbergen, *Een Hollandse Robinson Crusoe: dagboek van de derbannen VOC-dienaar Leendert Hasenbosch op het onbewoonde eiland Ascension A. D. 1725* [A Dutch Robinson Crusoe. The diary of Leendert Hasenbosch, an employee of the VOC who was banished to the desert island of Ascension, AD 1725] (Leiden: Manken Kasander & Wigman, 2002); Evan Davis, "'A Full and Exact Relation': Sodomy, Authenticity, and Publication in the Narrative of the Marooned Dutchman," *The Eighteenth Century* 44:2-3 (2003), 257-78; Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Evan Davis (Peterborough: Broadview Editions, 2010); Alex Ritsema, *A Dutch Castaway on Ascension Island in 1725* (Deventer: 2010).

⁷⁰ *Sodomy Punish'd: Being A True and Exact Relation Of what Befel to one Leondert Hussenlosch, A Dutch Man, Who by Command on the Dutch Fleet, was put on Shore on the Desolate Island of Ascension. Faithfully Translated from a Journal wrote by himself, during his Abode there; which was found last January, 1725-6 among other of his Things, by Persons belonging to an English Ship, Nam'd the James and Mary. Published from the Original Copy* (London: John Loveday, 1726); *An Authentic Relation of the Many Hardship and Sufferings of a Dutch Sailor, Who was put on Shore on the uninhabited Isle of Ascension, by Order of the Commadore of a Squadron of Dutch Ships. With a Remarkable Account of his Converse with Apparitions and Evil Spirits, during his Residence on the Island. And a particular Diary of his Transactions from the Fifth of May to the Fourteenth of October, on which Day he perished in a miserable Condition. Taken from the Original Journal found in his Tent by some Sailors, who landed from on Board the Compton, Captain Morson [sic] Commander, in January, 1725-6* (London & Dublin: George Faulkner, 1728); *The Just Vengeance of Heaven Exemplify'd in a Journal Lately Found by Captain Mawson (Commander of the Ship Compton) on the Island of Ascension. As he was Homeward-bound from India. In which is a full and exact Relation of the Author's being set on Shore there (by Order of the Commodore and Captains of the Dutch Fleet) for a most Enormous Crime he had been guilty of, and the extreme and unparallel'd Hardship, Sufferings, and Misery he endur'd, from the Time of his being left there, to that of his Death. All Wrote with his own Hand, and found lying near the Skeleton* (London: J. Jenkins, 1730).

⁷¹ This specific reconstruction of the event and the identification of the castaway, based on VOC and EIC sources, is thanks to Michael Koolbergen (Koolbergen, *Een Hollandse Robinson Crusoe*).

⁷² *An Authentic Relation*, 20 June 1725, 11.

name of the captain of the *Compton* as Morson, a detail that denotes at least a certain carelessness in verifying the information published in that edition.

Without attempting to reconstruct and analyse in detail coeval literary production or the subsequent historiographical debate—not least the one about the management of sexuality and “sodomy” on board ships by the different European companies—two cultural-historical aspects of this episode are nevertheless worth dwelling on.

Firstly, whether we consider the finding recorded by Mawson in the diary to be authentic or an invention, what emerges from these few lines is the familiarity of the seafaring community with the fictional aura that had developed around the theme of the shipwreck, nourished by facts and myths over centuries of navigational history and practice. For this it is sufficient to observe the scene of the discovery as described by Mawson, which seems to adhere “iconographically” to the typical imagery of the robinsonade. In the rugged landscape of the last wild Atlantic island, an isolated tent is found; the abandoned pieces of a tea service signal human presence and at the same time are emblematic of the (European) civilisation that endures despite the “primitive” context. Then there are an axe and a few nails, tools of the material culture of the *homo faber*; finally, “some Writeings Papers,” withstand the inclemency of a hostile nature: the written word, the ultimate tool of modern man, without which that episode could not have become history. However, there is no “Dutch enough amongst us to read them [the papers].” These words by Mawson suggest a second cultural aspect related to the EIC community: the multilingualism practised at different levels of employment.

It is well established that competence in trade languages—both European and local—became a necessary qualification for agents and merchants of the EIC over time.⁷³ By contrast, it is more difficult to ascertain the language skills of the sailors, given the widespread illiteracy and their disadvantaged backgrounds. Another complication is the rarity and different status of any sources produced by them compared to the volume of official papers kept in the EIC archives.

Thanks to the ship’s logs, however, we know that sailors also went ashore in the various ports to carry out their activities, more or less legally, in these European and especially Asian melting pots of multiculturalism.⁷⁴ It is possible to assume, therefore, that thanks to the experience accumulated over time, they learned the rudiments of the languages of the different companies and used the nautical and mercantile jargon shared by the practitioners, which was made up of terms from European languages distorted by usage and words from local dialects to name native objects or practices, which changed from region to region, also thanks to the intervention of the mediators.⁷⁵

From Mawson’s words, we can imagine that among the sailors and officers on board the *Compton*—who all seem English based on their names, although this does not guarantee their origins—there were some who could read the castaway’s written language, but not enough to translate the entire diary. This linguistic uncertainty could also be one of the factors behind the subsequent different translations of the diary in the published pamphlets.

Conclusions: A Paradigmatic Account?

This essay grew out of the many unexpected findings arising from the analysis of the logbook of William Mawson, captain of the *Compton*, an EIC ship travelling between England

⁷³ Kaislaniemi, “The Linguistic World of the Early English East India Company,” 62.

⁷⁴ It was not uncommon to see cases of crew members who, having gone ashore, “run away from the ship” [fol. 35r], as happened with the *Compton* doctor, Robert Douglas, on 12 April 1724 in Bombay.

⁷⁵ Kaislaniemi, “The Linguistic World of the Early English East India Company,” 62.

and the East Indies between 1723 and 1726. Discussions conducted based on this source helped shape GSR's research methodology regarding the logbooks and the experiences of dozens of crews on the Atlantic and Indian oceans, and along the coasts of Europe, Africa, and Asia.

As the title of this section perhaps suggests, this article proposes a close reading of the *Compton's* logbook with two main purposes: firstly, to reveal in detail the peculiarities and the unusual and unexpected events of this specific voyage; secondly, to interpret facts and data from the point of view of its formerly "mute" protagonists, identifying some paradigmatic episodes in the history of transoceanic British commercial navigation, particularly the responses to emergencies represented by unforeseen events, and above all the change of plans for the return to the motherland, with a prolonged stay of six months in regions that were not always hospitable and which even risked their lives.

Secondly, we highlight the seafaring culture's ability to manage the unexpected, analysing the practice of not only instrumental but also ecological observation of the environment.

Furthermore, we have mentioned aspects that were impossible to fully explore, but which nonetheless demonstrate the enormous informative potential of a source that could also be tapped for a history of maritime violence, sexuality policies on board, or cultural interconnections between Europeans and locals, or between western travellers and the ocean environment.

These aspects emerged and we were able to discuss them within the different theoretical and historiographical frames of reference thanks to the agency of the source at the centre of our analysis, Captain William Mawson, author and narrator of the account of the *Compton's* voyage. The overall layout, the language choices, the hypertextual references, and the practical and personal, occasionally contemplative, remarks with which Mawson drafted this manuscript constitute the gateway through which we can board and witness the development and practices of eighteenth-century transoceanic commercial navigation.

We have tried to show how, through a method of cultural-historical investigation, the *Compton's* becomes more than simply a journey of commercial routine by the EIC. Its logbook makes it possible to observe the actual experience of European transoceanic navigation through a source that proves, if properly interrogated, to have an enormous potential, as the articles in this special issue of *Itinerario* demonstrate from different angles.

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